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Giessen's Jews

(persecution of Jews  
under the Nazi regime)

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

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For many reasons, it appears presumptuous to discuss the Jewish Community of Giessen. Not a single member of the 800 families who belonged to the city's two synagogues before World War II is now living here. Most of them died in S.S. annihilation camps or during the deportations to the camps. A few - probably about 100 - managed to escape Germany before the terror descended.

Moreover, there remain no precise records of the Jewish Community. No one here knows the historical origins of the local Jews. The City archive is still in disorder 14 years after Giessen was destroyed by bombs. I have not even been able to find anyone who can tell me when the synagogues were built, although it seems certain they were constructed in the last century. Veils of ignorance and disinterest lie heavy upon the subject. And something more, perhaps - uneasiness.

Thus anything that might be written about Giessen's Jews would by definition, be only fragmentary, not to say inadequate. As for recent times, one former Giessener demanded of me: "How can you, a young American, presume to write about German Jews?" Yes, how indeed can we imagine the anxiety, the years of fear, the pain, and the ultimate agony? One listens to the few survivors, one reads their memoirs. Invariably they tell their stories in cool documentary fashion. Even those who lived it seem unable to communicate in words the human emotions attendant to the scenes of horror.

Finally, one asks, what is the point of reciting this tale again?

Do we not know enough of the Nazi crimes? Is there not evidence enough? Were not many of the legalized looters and killers punished? Are the Jews not dead or gone?

The answer is probably "yes".

However, there is still another question to be answered. It is this: Does the fate of Germany's Jews have any bearing on the present or the future of this nation? Again, the answer must be affirmative.

Here in Giessen there is scarcely a trace of the former Jewish community. A few gravestones here, a memorial tablet there. Yet the spirits of the vanished Jews still haunt the city and its inhabitants. They haunt those who boycotted their stores in 1933, who robbed them in 1938, who beat and kicked them in 1939, who hauled them off to the deportation trains in 1942.

EXEMPTIONS Section 3(b)

(2)(A) Priv

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You can meet those spirits at coffee-time in the cafes, or during the evenings at the tavern Stammtische. They were present also at last year's performances of The Diary of Anne Frank in the Stadt-theater. Or this spring, when an Offenburg high school teacher was prosecuted for anti-Semitic utterances: his name, Ludwig Zind, was on many lips in Giessen.

For these reasons, I feel it is valid to discuss Giessen's Jews in 1958.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before continuing, it will be necessary to lay down several premises. First of all, when speaking about German Jews, I mean those Germans whose religious faith was Jewish. Neither the National Socialist definition of a Jewish "race" nor the Zionist definition of a Jewish "nation" can be inferred from this premise. Second, in speaking of Jewish "descent", I mean those Germans whose forefathers practiced the Jewish religion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jews came to Upper Hesse with the first Roman legions at the time Jesus was born in Nazareth. Traces of their settlement were found recently in Butzbach, only 10 miles south of Giessen. However, the earliest evidences of permanent Jewish communities date back to the 11th century.

According to Germanic law, they were aliens, dependent on the whim and good will of the local prince. They were traders and money-lenders for the most part, being obliged to follow these callings by royal decree. The Jews were subjected to heavy taxes and frequent persecutions.

In Giessen there was a Judengasse (Jew Alley) or ghetto street near the old city wall as early as the 14th century. It seems likely that local Jews met with the same sort of alternating royal favor and mob cruelty as did Jews in most parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. It is probable also that they were persecuted during the plague years which visited Giessen so harshly. Nevertheless, Giessen's Jews held on even into the 17th century, when the Landgrave ordered all his cities to rid themselves of Jews.

Not until the 19th century did Giessen's Jewish Community take solid shape again. In 1820, the Archduke signed into law a Constitution which gave Hessian Jews equal rights, including residence in the cities. Half a century later, similar legislation - the so-called Emancipation Law - freed Jews from most of their second-class citizenship in Bismarck's Germany.

Meanwhile, scores of Jewish families who had been banned to the hinterland villages began flocking to the cities - among them, Giessen. Thus one can read in the City Register of merchants and cattle traders moving here from towns like Treis, Allendorf, and Leihgestern - all within a stone's throw of Giessen.

Despite the liberties which Jews enjoyed in the next decades, new troubles were awaiting them in the Bismarck Era. It was in this period of Germany's social and economic efflorescence that racial and political anti-Semitism first showed its face.

Here in Hesse, only a few miles north of Giessen, the first anti-Semitic candidate to be voted into the Reichstag was elected. The year was 1887, when the 26-year-old librarian and folklore student, Otto Boeckel carried the Election District Marburg-Frankenberg-Kirchhain on a platform of anti-Semitism and social reform.

From his Hessian hustings, Boeckel would shout: "Peasants! Free yourselves from the Jewish middlemen." His opponent described him thus: "The peasants adored him as their awakener and liberator. From miles away they came to his rallies. Peasant lads on horseback would escort him when he honored a Jew-free cattle market. Garlands were strung up across the streets, and mothers held their little children up and told them, 'look at that man, he is our liberator!' For a few years he was truly peasant king of Hesse."

Boeckel's popularity permitted him to hold his seat until 1903, when German imperialism succeeded hatred of the Jews as a vote-getter. A few years later he was an obscure figure. He died in 1923, poverty stricken and forgotten. Yet the Hessian peasants he stirred up 60 years ago retain their prejudices against Jewish tradesmen to this day.

However, the Jews felt new confidence in the flourishing Reich, although the state continued to circumscribe their activities (banning them from the civil service and the army, for instance). They quickly adapted themselves to urban life. In Giessen, they counted among the town's most eminent citizens - store owners, lawyers, teachers, professors, bankers. They were active in support of the university and the founding of the city theater. And they felt very much at home here.

Henry Pfeffer, formerly a garment buyer in Giessen and now living in New Jersey, writes: "The relationship between Jews and non-Jews was not bad. One knew most of the people in this small city, so that there was scarcely any friction."

Levi Sondheim writes from Washington D.C.: "The people of Giessen were hospitable towards the Jews until 1933. There was especially close intercourse in the years before 1914... I felt completely at home in Giessen."

Herta Strauss writes from New York: "Until 1933 they were hospitable."

Irma Katzenstein writes from Israel: "Until 1933, we never had the feeling that we were outsiders."

Mrs. Kenley writes from England: "My father was a merchant and belonged to the generation that still felt completely assimilated."

It would be too much to say that the Jews in Giessen or elsewhere in Germany were truly "emancipated" or "integrated" either before or after World War I. In Germany, freedom for Jews as for non-Jews was still a gift from the state - an Indian gift that could be taken back. Yet the Jews here had made rapid progress towards true emancipation, and no matter what hostility they experienced from their fellow-citizens, they felt themselves to be Germans, body and soul.

Giessen Jews served proudly in the ranks of the Archduke's 116th Infantry Regiment during the Great War, and some gave their lives for Kaiser and Vaterland on the battlefields of France. One of the city's most popular schoolteachers, Siegfried Kann, was a highly-decorated wounded veteran. In 1942 he was deported to Theresienstadt, where he perished. Fräulein Schneider, recalls her uncle, Herr Katz as a died-in-the-wool German militarist: "He had been a sergeant in the "116th" and he loved his comrades. They used to meet every week to play cards and tell war stories. He was a real hick." In World War II, the military comrades of Herr Katz gassed him at Auschwitz.

But the anti-Semitic terror which the Nazis inaugurated descended softly on cities like Giessen. Sure, there were book burnings at the university (in contrast to what was told me last August - see DB - 13). There were Nazi street demonstrations. Jewish store windows were smashed in the twilight soon after Hitler seized power. Homes were searched. And their shops were boycotted. But these scenes were nowhere near as violent as in the large cities.

Thus many Jews refused to take the Nazi threat seriously at first.

One can read of the few families who recognized the peril immediately, and fled: the dentist, Theodor Baum; the businessman, Hennoch Bass; Eugen Rothenberger, the lawyer. But the majority waited, most until it was too late.

"Of course we didn't take the threats of the Nazis seriously at first," writes Mrs. Kenley, "since we really felt ourselves to be Germans and didn't imagine our fellow citizens were capable of such things."

For most Jews in this community, it started with the little things. Fräulein Schneider, who was ten in 1933 says: "I had few Jewish friends. ... When I was eleven and twelve, I couldn't understand why I should be 'different'. The other girls joined the B.D.M. (female counterpart of the Hitler Youth). I had been in the Girl Scouts and wanted to join too. My older sister explained: 'They don't want us. Besides, we're smarter.' But I couldn't understand." Later, she was obliged to transfer to a purely Jewish school.

Frau Katzenstein, who was a 20-year-old department store clerk in 1933 writes: "The Nazi threat was clear to us, only one hoped perhaps that the political situation would change quickly. But in the beginning of 1935, when the Nazis persecuted my cousin, I knew that we could not remain in Germany. My cousin was persecuted by his former best friend, who had meant everything to him."

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Frau Bauermeister, a high school teacher of partly Jewish descent, tells of the taunts which Giessen Nazis aimed at her Jewish friends: "When they talked about the gibes they were bitterly mortified. They couldn't comprehend it."

Frau Scheurer, wife of Giessen's school superintendent (DB - 2), tells of an old friend's question: "She asked, 'Is it true that you've become a half-Jew through marriage?' That's how deluded they were."

Then there was the boycott.

Frau Johanna Schmidt, now 78, tells of her "aryan" husband's wholesale cigar firm: "First they vilified him for being married to me. One of his own colleagues abused him. Business got worse. After the boycott, it went to pieces."

That happened to most of Giessen's "Jewish" stores, beginning in April, 1933 - Bar's shoe store on the Marktplatz, Sondheim's paint wholesale house on the Nordanlage, Pfeffer's dress shop, Kesseler's meat market, and many others. In 1937, many of the firms owned by Jews were "aryanized", in other words, liquidated. The owners were forced to sell out at a low price, and in some cases, simply to turn them over to non-Jewish entrepreneurs.

The boycott worked the other way too, as Frau Schmidt says: "I went into a store to buy some toilet articles and the girl at the counter said 'No, I don't sell to Jews.'"

Such things were the general rule as the National Socialists tightened up on the Jews. But there were many notable exceptions - people who went out of their way to buy in the Jewish stores, people who went out of their way to help them do their purchasing, scorning the Storm Troopers who were often posted at the doors of the branded shops. But the reaction of most to the Nazi transgression was pained silence.

The harrying took other forms, however. Husbands and wives living in mixed marriages were pressured to get rid of their "tainted" partners. Many gave in. Thus Fraulein Schneider's father divorced her mother in 1935, simply because she was of Jewish ancestry. This was to have lethal consequences in many similar cases. Or there is the story of Trude Hess, a gifted young Giessen actress. She was engaged to a lawyer who suddenly joined a Storm Troop formation. While she was preparing her trousseau she received a letter from her fiance saying the wedding was off, for political reasons. She committed suicide. These were typical results of the Nurnberg Laws of 1935.

Or there was Herr Dreyfuss, who had a large store in the Schulstrasse. His home was famous as a salon for local actors and artists. One day his cashier, a woman who had worked in the store for years, made some nasty remarks about his Jewishness. During the noon hour, Herr Dreyfuss took out his pistol and shot himself.

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Jewish members of the Stadttheater company were also ousted by the Nazi purifiers. Thus Karl Ritter, the dramatist, was fired. And the singer, Herr Falken, was also dropped.

One must keep in mind that all this was happening in a city of 38,000 inhabitants, a city where "everyone knew everyone." It was a city where there had been no open anti-Semitic actions for over 300 years, a city that prided itself on its old burgher families, its crooked streets, its picturesque half-timbered houses, its quaint taverns, yes, and its Jews.

When you sit at one of Giessen's numberless Stammtische on a Friday evening you can hear a remark like this: "Now Fritz Kessler, there was a fine butcher. I worked for him for 15 years. Christmas. That was a time. He gave us 50 marks apiece. He was a good Jew. A wonderful man..." Or Rosenbaum, or Zwung. If you went to enough Stammtische you would hear that every Jew was a "good Jew."

Yet all of a sudden these fellow-citizens could no longer attend the same school or university, no longer sit in the same tavern, walk the same street unmolested, buy at the same store uninsulted. They lived next door, but all of a sudden there was an insurmountable barrier between them and their neighbors. They were "non-Aryan".

"It was never the old burghers who did the harrying," says Frau Bauermeister. "But rather the unemployed, the youngsters who had been 'poisoned' and the little employees with the party emblems who were suddenly big shots. In some cases the burghers went out of their way to help the Jews. I know one case of a man who took over a Jewish business and saved it until after the war for the Jew."

Frau Katzenstein writes: "I left Germany in 1935, and at that time there were still many who wore the Nazi uniform but were not anti-Semites..."

Herr Pfeffer relates: "It was ever clearer to me that the hate of Jews was growing rapidly from year to year and that staying in Germany was impossible. Since Giessen was always a university town, this venom found especially fertile ground among the students and not a little among the scholars. As a garrison town, among the military too." Henry Pfeffer was able to flee in November, 1937.

In addition to the tragedies, countless ironies were created by the Nürnberg Laws, which regulated the "racial status" of all Germans. Frau Bauermeister, who became "one-eighth Jewish" according to the law, tells of her father, a doctor. "He worked with Dr. Kranz, who became the Nazi Rektor of the University." (DB - 13) When he heard my father was not 'full aryan' he was all broken up about it."

Fritz Bouchholtz was special studies director at the Army technical School in Giessen, no less. In 1936, it was discovered that he was "not-Aryan", and the Wehrmacht fired him.

The next big wave of Jewish refugees began fleeing Giessen in 1937-1938 - Hermann Bluhm to South Africa, Walter Neuburger and Ferdinand Levi to America. Others fled to Berlin, like the dentist, Ludwig Wertheim and the scholar, Fritz Wolff, in order to duck out of sight before taking the next step outside the frontiers of the Reich.

Meanwhile, the Jews who remained were cut off more and more from the community. Few dared to speak to them in public for fear of being denounced as a Judeknacht - a Jew servant. Usually, if a Jew was spoken to by an Aryan friend he would warn him to move along and not endanger himself. Frau Scheurer recalls admonishing Herr Rutz in this manner. "They can lick my ass," he replied, and went on talking with her. Next day he was called into Gestapo Headquarters, but he managed to explain it away.

More than one Giessener has told me how deeply humiliating and shaming this was for them. Erich Decker, whose family helped several Jews get away, has spoken of such incidents again and again.

Giessen's two synagogues continued to hold services, despite the fact that the rabbis who had served them for many years were dead. Ludwig Hirschfeld, who ministered to the orthodox synagogue in the Steinstrasse for 40 years, had died in 1933. David Sander, who conducted the liberal synagogue on the Sudanlage, died in 1937.

The synagogues remained largely unmolested, except for occasions when an S.S. unit would march into the courtyard during a service. Likewise the Jewish community house in the Lonystrasse was untouched - until November, 1938.

It was then that something happened which few Giesseners imagined possible - not even those who had read their copies of Mein Kampf studiously, not even those S.S. men, Storm Troopers, Party officials, and Gestapo agents who were "in the know".

But that is another story.

David Bilder